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AUTHOR Wilder, David A.; Allen, Vernon L.
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ABSTRACT

An experiment was performed in which 155 undergraduate student subjects were provided with information about a stimulus person whose behavioral consistency varied on several issues. The study assumed that if the individual's behavior on the relevant topic was consistent, then behavior on the other issues should have no impact on persuasiveness, but if a consistent style of behavior was necessary, then the individual must be consistent on all issues. Results indicated persuasiveness was maximized when a consistent style of behavior was manifested across all items. The individual was perceived as more internally directed, more confident and more persuasive when either consistent or variable on all issues. It was concluded that maximum persuasiveness is attributed to a person who exhibits a consistent pattern of behavior, rather than consistent behavior. Response style is thus a component of social influence. (KS)

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David A. Wilder and Vernon L. Allen

(1) Title of Paper:

Persuasiveness as a function of intraindividual consistency on several issues

(2) Problem:

Research on small group behavior has shown that dissent by a consistent minority may influence the majority (Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972). In one set of experiments subjects expressed their preferences for objects that varied on several dimensions (e.g., color, size, shape). A confederate consistently chose the color dimension. Subjects exposed to the consistent minority made significantly more "color" choices than control subjects. Moscovici and Faucheux (1972) attributed the influence of the minority to its consistent response style. In their experiments judgments were made on only one topic--preference for certain objects. It is unclear whether the persuasiveness of the minority was due to its consistent behavior on the specific topic in question or to an inference that the consistency reflected a more general style of behavior. These alternatives were separated in the following experiment. Subjects were provided with information about a stimulus person whose behavioral consistency varied on several issues in addition to the one of concern in the experiment. If consistency of behavior on the relevant topic is sufficient to enhance the person's persuasiveness, then his behavior on the other issues should have no impact on his persuasiveness. But if a consistent style of behavior is necessary, then he must be consistent on all issues.

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(3) Subjects:

Subjects were 155 undergraduates at the University of Virginia.

They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2x2 factorial design. Factors were consistency of the stimulus person's attitude toward item A and consistency of his other attitudes.

(4) Procedure:

Each subject was given one of four graphs illustrating a person's attitudes on five anonymous issues. His attitudes toward the issues (labeled A, B, C, D, and E) were indicated for every other month over a year. For each month the person's alleged agreement or disagreement with each item was indicated by an "X" on a seven point scale from "-3" (disagree) to "+3" (agree). The experiment was conducted in a questionnaire format to ensure that no factors (e.g., nature of the attitude item, subject's relationship to stimulus person) except the consistency of the stimulus person's behavior could influence the subjects. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the following four conditions:

(1) Consistent A-Consistent Others (CA-CO). The graph of the stimulus person's attitudes indicated that he had given the same response to item A every month. Consistent agreement and disagreement was counterbalanced across subjects. He had also responded consistently on the other items.

(2) Consistent A-Variable Others (CA-VO). The person responded consistently on item A. On the other items his attitudes were inconsistent, varying one position on the scale each month.

(3) Variable A-Consistent Others (VA-CO). The stimulus person varied his attitude toward item A from month to month. His attitudes toward the remaining items were the same as in the CA-CO condition.

(4) Variable A-Variable Others (VA-VO). The person changed his position on all items over the year. His attitude toward item A showed the same flux as in the VA-CO condition. And his attitudes

toward the other items varied as in the CA-VO condition.

Dependent measures consisted of three questions posed in a Likert format with nine point scales: (1) Subjects indicated the extent to which the stimulus person's attitude toward item A reflected his disposition. Larger scores indicated a more internal or dispositional attribution. (2) Subjects estimated the confidence the stimulus person had in his attitude toward item A. Larger means indicated more perceived confidence. (3) Subjects indicated how persuasive the stimulus person was on item A. Larger scores indicated more persuasiveness. For each question data were analyzed in a 2x2 analysis of variance (Winer, 1971).

(5) Results:

Attribution of Behavioral Causality. The analysis revealed a significant interaction between consistency on item A and consistency on the other items ($F=46.82$, $df=1/146$, $p<.001$; Table 1). Subjects made a more dispositional inference about the cause of the person's attitude toward item A when his attitude toward A showed the same tendancy to change or remain constant as his other attitudes (VA-VO and CA-CO conditions). A consistent style of behavior on all items (consistent variability or constancy) was perceived as more dispositional than consistent behavior on some items and variable behavior on others (CA-VO and VA-VO conditions).

Attribution of Confidence. The interaction between consistency on item A and consistency on the other items attained significance ($F=148.76$, $df=1/146$, $p<.001$; Table 1). The person was perceived as more confident when he either consistently held a position on all items (CA-CO condition) or consistently changed his position (VA-VO condition) than when his behavior over time on item A differed from

that for the other items (CA-VO and VA-CO conditions).

Attribution of Persuasiveness. Again the interaction between consistency on item A and consistency on the other items was significant ($F=50.38$, $df=1/146$, $p<.001$; Table 1). Subjects attributed greater persuasiveness to the stimulus person when his attitudes either all changed (VA-VO condition) or all remained constant (CA-CO condition) than when his attitude toward A did not follow the pattern of his other attitudes (CA-VO and VA-CO conditions). What appeared to maximize the person's persuasiveness was a consistent style of behavior across all items. He was perceived as more internally directed, more confident, and more persuasive when he was either consistent or variable on all issues.

(6) Implications and Conclusions:

Results from this study bear upon the relationship between behavioral consistency and social influence (Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972). Maximum persuasiveness is attributed to a person who exhibits a consistent pattern of behavior. The behavior itself, however, need not be consistent on any one issue so long as a clear, predictable style of behavior emerges across several items. In this experiment the person who was variable on all issues (consistently inconsistent) was perceived as persuasive as the person who was consistent on all issues. But consistent behavior on one issue did not enhance persuasiveness on that issue if the person was inconsistent on other issues (CA-VO condition). Thus, consistency of a person's response style across several items may be a component of social influence.

References

Moscovici, S., & Faucheux, C. Social influence, conformity bias, and the study of active minorities. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology. (Vol. 6). New York: Academic Press, 1972. Pp. 149-202.

Winer, B. J. Statistical principles in experimental design. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

Table 1

Means for Consistency on Item A by Consistency on Other Items Interaction

Conditions	Attribution of Causality	Attribution of Confidence	Attribution of Persuasiveness
CA-CO	6.38_a	7.53_a	6.45_a
VA-VO	6.66_a	8.28_a	6.22_a
CA-VO	3.85_b	4.31_b	4.23_b
VA-CO	4.09_b	3.70_b	3.31_b

Note--Column means with different subscripts differ at the .01 level of significance (Newman-Keuls test).